

REGIONAL CONSERVATION PLANNING AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP: CHALLENGES, CHARACTERISTICS AND STRATEGIES IN CALIFORNIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP) program emphasizes planning for whole ecosystem conservation. After a decade of the program, local government leadership is recognized as a critical component of a successful NCCP. Without such leadership, regional conservation plans can often falter in the planning phase or become stagnant and never get finalized. This report seeks to assess the approaches, techniques and characteristics of local government leadership that facilitate successful regional conservation plans, i.e., plans that are approved by local jurisdictions and accepted by all stakeholders, with consensus and momentum carrying forward into implementation.

Local government leadership refers to both public elected officials for a city and/or county, and city and/or county staff central to the daily management and coordination of complex conservation plans. The focus on local leadership recognizes that political support and strong leadership of the planning process is critical to development of an NCCP.

Common Concepts

Some common concepts emerged across the various cases that provide a foundation from which to discuss local leadership.

- *Collaborative planning processes* – the success of an NCCP depends in large part on the success of the process. In some jurisdictions, the collaborative approach instituted by the NCCP program is a new approach that therefore requires local capacity-building.
- *Political leadership and support* – there was general consensus that political leadership and support is critical to the success of a conservation planning process.
- *Locally-relevant incentive* – those plans that did not have a locally-based incentive to participate in the NCCP process often move along too slowly or become stagnant.
- *Outreach and public education* – an NCCP is largely a political campaign. As such, it requires constant outreach to multiple interests.

Leadership Challenges

Local governments currently face myriad challenges in California. Most significant is a deepening state budget crisis that makes it challenging to have the staff or resources to undertake long-term planning.

Some leadership challenges specific to the NCCP process emerged in the case studies. They include:

- Limited local capacity for collaborative planning processes
- Turnover of elected officials
- Developing effective stakeholder working groups
- Small but vocal and influential constituency that opposes the plan
- City/County interactions
- Lack of, or neutral, political support from elected officials
- How to “sell the message”

Key Leadership Characteristics for Conservation Planning

Due to the long, often shifting, timeframe of an NCCP process, there has to be a *strong personal motivation* to do what is needed to get the best plan developed, approved, funded and implemented. Elected officials articulated that a long-term vision for their county or city and a desire to enhance the local quality of life contributed greatly to their motivation to participate. Many local government staff expressed a strong belief in conservation and a process for better land use planning. There was a strong commitment to collaborative processes and a desire to foster legitimate public participation. Stakeholders often hoped to influence the negotiations and have some impact on the ultimate outcome.

Other attributes that contributed to successful plans included:

- “Centrist” political leaders
- Broad and varied political experience
- Skilled facilitator
- Problem-solvers

Leadership Strategies for Conservation Planning

How do leaders address some of these challenges? How do local leaders build support and momentum to bring the appropriate people together to develop creative and lasting solutions? These questions are at the very heart of a successful NCCP. In an effort to highlight the “how” and “why”, leaders and other participants interviewed were asked to reflect upon some of the successful and less successful strategies employed to develop specific NCCPs. Specific examples detailed in the body of the report further illustrate each of these leadership strategies, touched upon briefly below.

Cultivating leadership at multiple levels: Successful NCCPs showed that it took more than one person who was motivated to get a conservation plan developed, funded and approved. It took the vision and dedication of various people working together.

Local relevance: Elected officials especially expressed the need to have a solid reason for doing a conservation plan that people can understand locally. Leaders in several counties were able to use the NCCP process to address local concerns such as transportation infrastructure and natural areas preservation.

Strong leadership of the process emerged as an important factor.

- Several leaders highlighted the importance of starting with the right questions. Does the “political will” exist to undertake a conservation planning process? Are key

interest groups on board and if not, what will it take to bring them to the table? What is the best strategy for success?

- Once the stage is set for success, how do you actually bring people together, explore the various interests that exist, and work towards an end goal? Relationship-building created the foundation for this phase. Other strategies interviewees identified focused on instituting regular communication with decision makers (such as a weekly phone call), using a consensus-based approach with stakeholder working groups, and managing the process by using planning tools such as a process map.
- Active support and participation from the local board of supervisors or the NCCP steering committee helped sustain the momentum to keep the process moving forward. Facilitating interest-based negotiations was an important strategy.

Outreach and education: Leaders highlighted the importance of outreach and public education to the overall process. Leaders stressed the need to continuously conduct outreach at a personal, face-to-face level in order to be effective. Engaging through dialogue was one key method for both leaders who facilitated the stakeholder group and for those who elicited political support or broader participation. This dialogue was important to explore interests and build relationships to carry the process forward.

Supporting Local Leadership

General recommendations for local government leaders include:

- **Build a community of practice** to share lessons learned, effective strategies for implementing and managing successful conservation planning processes, and how particular leaders deal with challenges that arise.
- **Build coalitions of support** in the initial phase of a regional conservation planning process. Reach out locally to see if the interest and political will exists.
- **Highlight incremental successes** along the way so that participants feel there are tangible benefits to the process.
- **Incorporate relationship-building and collaboration training** into the stakeholder working group meetings.

Recommendations for the Wildlife Agencies working in partnership with local government include:

- **Conduct an evaluation of every completed planning process** that includes discussions with political leaders, staff, stakeholders and relevant agency staff. What are some of the lessons that can be distilled? How were particular challenges resolved? What strategies were successful or less successful, and what could be done differently?
- **Develop a Local Leader Handbook** that speaks directly to local government leaders embarking on regional conservation planning processes. What are the goals and expectations? Tools and strategies? Questions to ask?
- **Engage in collaborative leadership development** through groups such as the Sierra Business Council or the Northern California Local Government Leadership Institute (CSU Chico).

- **Foster local political support** for an NCCP process by highlighting and developing the important role that a regional manager (DFG) or a field supervisor (FWS) can play.
- **Develop Outreach Guidelines** to assist local leaders conduct more effective outreach and public education.